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"Leaving the Rez": Indigenizing Urban Space in Selected  
Short Stories by Sherman Alexie

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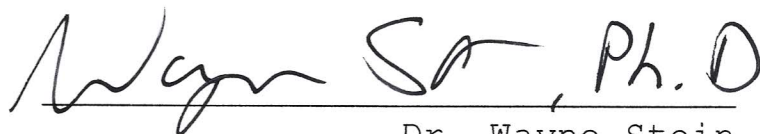
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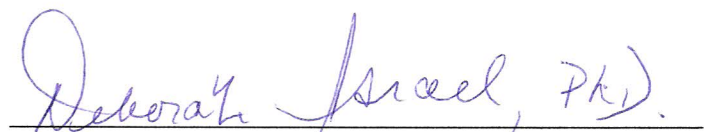
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## ABSTRACT

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TITLE OF THESIS: "Leaving the Rez": Indigenizing Urban  
Space in Selected Short Stories by Sherman Alexie

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As the world continues to move away from rural forms of living, so too do Native Americans struggle with this transition, both within the realm of literature and in the real world around us. The plight of modern Native Americans involves not only a transition from reservation to city, but also a struggle to be included in the defining forces of this country. Sherman Alexie's urban Indians clearly function in separate areas on the identity continuum, varying between total assimilation and complete culture preservation, which allows Alexie to make a statement about Native American identity in general as well as progressively shift the focus of his work over time.

In Alexie's short story "Saint Junior," the main character, Roman Gabriel Fury, attempts to adjust his identity to that of the dominant culture by immersing himself in an urban setting through his involvement with an international basketball team, but he eventually fails and has no other option than to return to his home on the reservation. The story, "The Search Engine," depicts the life of Corliss Joseph, a young Indian woman who desires to fully adjust her identity so that it meshes with that of the dominant culture and is actively pursuing this goal through her involvement in higher education, often valuing the tenets of the dominant culture above those of her own heritage. In Alexie's story "War Dances," the unnamed protagonist exists as a mostly well-adjusted urban Indian who benefits from his involvement in both his Native culture and the dominant culture. This progression within Alexie's work demonstrates a more positive outlook of acceptance between the two cultures and acknowledges the necessity of a dualistic identity within such individuals.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Many controversies exist among contemporary critics of modern Native American<sup>1</sup> literature, often dealing specifically with the maintenance of tribal culture in conjunction with the incorporation of modern values. In much of his work, Sherman Alexie strives to preserve the historical accuracies of Native American culture, while also pushing for a more progressive view of the modern Indian, often by incorporating aspects of the urban cityscape rather than focusing exclusively on reservation life. By analyzing Alexie's exploration of modern Native American issues, such as urban existence and maintaining cultural traditions, we are able to see that he is striving to be a writer for the people, his people, and guard the

sacredness of all Indian culture while rewriting the historical perception of the Native Americans. There is a clear progression throughout the body of Alexie's work toward a more centralized focus on the issues of urban Indians who are struggling to find their place in the contemporary world, while still preserving the cultural heritage that they hold dear. With regards to Alexie's more recent work, Jeff Berglund notes that:

In addition to an exploration of reservation life, in books such as *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), *Ten Little Indians* (2003), *Flight* (2007), and *War Dances* (2009), [Alexie] has turned his attention to the experiences of urban Indian people living in a multiethnic environment in situations where identity and cultural loyalties are questioned because of class standing or romantic and sexual relationships.

(xii)

This new urban wilderness that Alexie explores in relation to the Native Americans inhabiting this space, both fictional and realistic, provides a new landscape of expression and exploration that demands the attention Alexie has so fittingly paid it. However, examination of these issues also brings up new problems that must be

addressed, specifically that of cohesive identity crises. The urban Indian has, by nature, the dualistic identity issues of a hybrid individual, a status that brings with it the connotations associated with this prevalent cultural struggle throughout both the history of literature and the actual histories of nations across the globe. Traditionally, hybrids "were seen as threats to the biological purity and cultural and racial superiority of European whites" (Marotta 295). Much like the hybrids of postcolonial literature, such as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, and the culturally misplaced expatriates of "the lost generation," Sherman Alexie's urban Indians exist in a world in which they do not belong and must struggle to find a middle ground between the two identities that are constantly at odds with one another, that of their Native heritage and that of the dominant white culture that surrounds them.

The issue of hybrid identity calls for a discussion of Robert Park's "Marginal Man Theory," a notion that identifies individuals with dualistic personas as marginalized and put in a position of inferiority by the dominant culture. Park defines such a hybrid individual as:

A man living and sharing intimately in the  
cultural life and traditions of two distinct



peoples; never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he now sought to find a place. (892)

Clearly, urban Indians fit directly in this category as they are trapped between two worlds and must struggle to find their place within both.

History has long portrayed Native Americans as fixed images on the reservation, romanticized as mystic naturalists with special powers; however, Alexie's motivation to remove this iconic view and, instead, replace it with a more contemporary, realistic representation of Native Americans illustrates a trend in modern Native American literature as a whole. Meredith James claims that because urban Indians often feel displaced in an urban setting, they are fundamentally detached from their cultural awareness, stating:

This is not to suggest that Indians only belong in pristine natural settings, but rather to clarify that the current urban environment is an unwelcoming Euro-American construction. Grappling with issues of urban identity is nothing new to Native authors. Alexie follows in

a long line of Native authors critiquing the colonial imposition of termination and relocation projects in the 1950s. These projects-masked as helping Indians become part of mainstream American society-left Indian people disconnected from their tribal lands and struggling in large cities. (173)

This argument is a classic example of the negative connotation often represented by the concept of the urban Indian; however, while Alexie's urban Indians often struggle with issues of identity and isolation, they just as frequently benefit from their existence in the metropolitan cityscapes they call home and are able to establish themselves in a niche of the community while still maintaining their cultural heritage and traditions. Vince Marotta recognizes the importance of escaping the boundaries that isolate individuals, claiming that "the human condition is understood in terms of its propensity to transcend and erect boundaries. Social, cultural, physical and symbolic boundaries...define who we are, but they do not necessarily limit us" (298). Alexie's urban Indians often defy the social and cultural boundaries that captivate them and, as a result, experience the

limitlessness of exposure to and interaction with two very different cultures.

Many people have claimed a type of necessary essentialism when dealing with Native American literature, indicating that one must be an Indian to understand Indian works of art. However, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn notes:

Two of the most important ethical ideas concerning bodies of indigenous knowledge have had little chance for exploration. They are: first, that the intellect of a people is not property and, therefore, not for sale or appropriation; and second, that sovereign nationalism (i.e., tribalism) is, contrary to much academic thought, a humane trademark in native/indigenous literature(s). (46)

Literary essentialism is a narrow-focused, exclusionary tactic that only functions to eliminate diversity or innovation rather than creating the type of purity that its proponents suggest. While ethnic literature often does require some background knowledge of both history and culture, Sherman Alexie makes his work much more accessible to a wider range of readership, bringing the issue of Indianness to the foreground of American society in a way

that has not been done by any other modern Native American author.

Many of the characters within Sherman Alexie's work typify the negative stereotypes associated with Native Americans; however, despite any trials or downfalls they may experience, these individuals often demonstrate a deep-seated desire for maintaining the traditions of their ancestors by participating in or creating their own ceremonies to honor this important heritage. Thus, despite any negative ideas that may be associated with Alexie's chosen topic, he still aims to portray his characters as always remaining true to their heritage. According to Andrew Dix, this is an example of "white deployment of hybridity and transnationality in Alexie's fiction [which] is more often hegemonic and opportunist than it is liberatory" (69). Many of Alexie's characters are searching for some link to their heritage that they can retain and elaborate upon so that their fate does not remain so uncertain and so that they may be at peace with their Indianness in the world of white men. This type of cultural hegemony at work is obviously apparent in relation to the Native American population in the modern world. In his essay "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," Jackson Lears claims that "the ideas,

values, and experiences of dominant groups are validated in public discourse; those of subordinate groups are not, though they may continue to thrive beyond the boundaries of received opinion" (574). The values and ideals of white men populate the social discourse of America and, therefore, create a troubling atmosphere for the Native Americans as a subordinate group who must conform to the views of the dominant group.

Sherman Alexie has initiated a personal journey to illustrate the kinds of issues that are affecting Native Americans today, specifically those that live in metropolitan spaces. As an urban Indian himself, Alexie writes from a place of knowledge and compassion, while still attempting to explore:

his love/hate relationship with the reservation. It is not his intent to portray reservation Indians as helpless, poverty-stricken alcoholics, although many of his characters possess those features...Alexie's work portrays love for the strength of its residents, who struggle to survive amidst abysmal, nearly "Third World" conditions, while he condemns the conditions themselves and how those conditions often poison

and demolish Indian people's pride and dignity.

(Bruce 9)

Alexie's characters embody the Indianness and traditions of their ancestors, yet are still able to adapt to the mainstream culture around them. They often struggle with this transition, but many find peace in the journey.

The main character of Alexie's short story "Saint Junior," Roman Gabriel Fury, provides the reader with an example of the cyclical nature of shifting Indian identities. He is a Native American who begins his life on the reservation and makes his escape into the contemporary world of urban spaces, only to find his way back again in the end. "The Search Engine" focuses on Corliss Joseph, a young Indian woman on a journey for education and fulfillment outside of her tribe, yet desperately seeking a connection with an anonymous Indian poet whom she believes may have the answers she is looking for. And finally, "War Dances" provides a study of a more established unnamed urban Indian who maintains a connection with his tribal heritage while still appreciating the benefits of living among the dominant culture. All of these characters are at different positions on the continuum of Native American identity, providing an excellent case for analysis of the process and effects that this necessary dualistic identity

has on the people, as individuals, and the culture, as a whole, therefore facilitating my belief that Alexie's work illustrates a clear progression toward functionality and harmony amongst his characters living within urban spaces. Alexie aims to provide an example for his people of the type of effective incorporation of both cultures that enables the sense of harmony his people, as a whole, have been searching for, an example that is evident through analysis of his stories.

Note

1. The terms "Native American," "Indian," and "Native Indian" are used interchangeably throughout this text. When the terms "urban" or "modern" Indian/Native American appear, they are generally referring to Native Americans living in a city or other urban environment, rather than on the reservation.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Returning to the Space: A Cyclical Analysis of Urban Indian Behavior in Sherman Alexie's "Saint Junior"**

As the world continues to move away from rural forms of living, Native Americans also struggle with this transition, both within the realm of literature and in the real world around us. According to Ewelina Banka, the plight of modern Native Americans involves not only a transition from reservation to city, but also a struggle to be included in the defining forces of this country. She argues that Native Americans are fighting to find their place in the twentieth century, trapped within the confines of the stereotypes and ignorance that continually surround them, claiming that:

For decades urban America has been encroaching upon American wilderness, simultaneously denying Native Americans the right to participate in...shaping [the] American nation. And despite the fact that Native Americans have been living in cities since the early decades of the twentieth century, even today, in white America's imagination reservation remains the only place for the American Indian. (35)

As the wilderness initially inhabited by the Native Americans continues to dwindle due to the irresponsibly outlandish industrialization of America, these natives are forced to occupy smaller and smaller portions of the land they once dominated. With the current trend of moving from the reservation to the city, often mirroring and even coinciding with the urban migration of white citizens during the Industrial Revolution, Native Americans are struggling to carve out a place for themselves in the modern world.

Sherman Alexie's urban Indians, specifically the ones discussed in this work, are at different positions on the continuum of Native American identity, providing an excellent case for analysis of the process and effects that their necessary dualistic identity has on the people, as

individuals, and the culture, as a whole. The issue of urban identity is an ongoing crisis that has created a type of essential hybrid nature within these individuals, which causes them to question and somehow come to terms with their place in this urban space. In Sherman Alexie's own work, the issue of urbanized Indians has been brought to the foreground in recent years. There is a definite shift between the traditional, or perhaps stereotypical, reservation life Alexie depicted in the past to the more progressive and accurately portrayed Indians of the present. In an interview with Jessica Chapel, Alexie claims that the urban Indian population is much "underrepresented" in Native American writing, noting that:

Sixty percent of all Indians live in urban areas, but nobody's writing about them...and the ironic thing is very, very few of those we call Native American writers actually grew up on reservations, and yet most of their work is about reservations. As someone who grew up on a reservation, I'm tired of it...I've been living in the city-Seattle-for five years. I live a very cosmopolitan life now...To pretend that I'm just a Rez boy is impossible. (97)

With the major success of his previous work, Alexie decided to push the issue of urbanized Indians in his collection of short stories, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, and instill in it a type of "urban perspective" that would accurately portray the lives of many modern Native Americans, including himself, a theme which he is still continuing in his current work.

The theme of indigenized urban spaces can be plainly seen in Alexie's short story, "Saint Junior." The beginning of the story depicts a group of six male Indian singers who situate themselves high on top of Lookout Mountain, drumming and singing their "indigenous blues" to the sleeping town below ("Saint Junior" 150). Despite the seemingly traditional setting and ethereal air, these men are not the stereotypical reservation Indians one might expect from a band of traditional Native singers, but a curious mixture of tradition and modernity. The singers, dressed casually in T-shirts, baseball caps, and blue jeans, "ignored howling winds and the impossibly white snow piling up on their shoulders. Three of the men wore their long black hair in careful braids, two wore crew cuts, and the last was chemotherapy bald" (151). The juxtaposition of ancient rituals with modern mannerisms can be seen in the way the men maintain their long braids, yet still

undergo progressive cancer treatments and sport contemporary, short haircuts. This description immediately calls up the ironic image of a clichéd Indian warrior leisurely browsing the sale racks at the Gap, flipping his elegant braids over his shoulder as he searches for his favorite crew cut T-shirt.

But strangely enough, all of these hybrid Indian singers are now ghosts, still gracing the land of their ancestors with their lovely songs; they were all killed when "their blue van collided with a logging truck on the S-curve of Little Falls Road, just a few feet away from the natural spring that provided the namesake for the group" (152). Despite their adoption of aspects of modern life, these singing ghosts still hold their cultural traditions in high regard, maintaining these rituals even after death. They sing for their ancestors and for their descendants, attempting to provide them with a kind of spiritual guidance from the afterlife. Accordingly, the singers sang their songs "because they understood what it meant to be Indian and dead and alive and still bright with faith and hope" (153). Alexie himself claims that Native Americans sing these songs, these "49s," for the same reason that all musicians create their music: "to tell stories, to pray to God, to curse God, to cry in our beers or our Kool-Aid, to

have fun with the guys or girls, to get laid, to get attention, to protest, to make money, to connect with other human beings" (qtd. in Berglund xiv). The songs of these particular Native singers are intended to show others what it means to "be Indian" and to share in this Indianness with each other, while sharing their own stories at the same time. As part of this element of personal narrative, it is important to note that the relationship history and resulting lineage of each singer is mentioned; the Cold Springs Singers had "fathered seven daughters and three sons. Three of them had married and two had divorced" (151). This reference to their offspring illustrates the singers' motivation in continuing their musical tradition, while the fact that several of the members had been married and divorced exemplifies their conversion to modern living; divorce was extremely rare in Native American culture before being forced to integrate into the dominant white culture. Diana Meyers Bahr argues, "Although urban Indians constitute more than 50 percent of the North American native population, Indians in the city are often considered the invisible minority" (6). These ghostly singers project the invisibility of their tribe, the separateness that exists between those Indians living in the city and those who stay close to the home of their ancestors.

This ritualistic epigraph of the Indian singers precedes the remainder of the narrative, which is a story about the life and plight of Roman Gabriel Fury, a middle-aged Native American man who dared to leave the reservation in search of urban glory during the peak of his youthful athletic abilities. Roman was able to follow his dreams off the reservation by playing basketball and through his love of reading and education: "he'd played basketball until his palms bled, and read books, hundreds of books, thereby saving himself from a lifetime of reservation poverty" (159). This dedication to his sport and to his education enabled Roman to rise above the limitations of his prescribed (by other Indians around him, that is) future and aim for a goal of his own creation. With regards to Roman's loyalty to his chosen sport, even after retiring and returning to the reservation, Daniel Grassian argues that, "For Roman, a former international basketball player, basketball has become his main cultural heritage—one that breaks down arbitrary walls between people—rather than ethnicity, which creates boundaries" (169). Roman Fury is not a true urban Indian, but he believes in the peace that is created by accepting both worlds: that of his ancient heritage and that of the modern, dominant culture.

After Roman moves back to the "rez," he maintains his connection to the industrial world through constant interaction with his two televisions, one "small one [with] great picture but no sound [and one] large one [with] great sound and terrible reception" (156-7). These televisions, symbols of the city and advanced technology, function as a portal through which Roman may be transported at any moment back to the urbanized life he once enjoyed. Roman claims that he purchased his satellite television service to "enrich his life by partaking in the free expression of sitcom writers and shopping-channel salespeople" and to provide his wife with "a source of entertainment" (156); however, the television actually acts as the threshold of his lost talent and a way in which he can romanticize and memorialize his experiences as a basketball player. The fact that both of these televisions are damaged seems to indicate the brokenness of Roman's connection to his past as a part of the urban world.

Basketball was Roman Fury's ticket off the reservation. He excelled at the sport and used this to his advantage in order to escape the confines of his native poverty and travel the world. But basketball also functions as a parallel to the concept of indigenized urbanization in the story. On the one hand, Roman claims



that "basketball [is] the most democratic sport. All you need...to play [is] something that resemble[s] a ball and something else that approximate[s] the shape of a basket" (156). This concept obviously worked to his advantage as a youth growing up amidst the poverty of the reservation; Roman was able to practice his chosen sport despite the fact that he was unable to afford elaborate or expensive equipment. However, the reference to basketball as a "democratic" sport clearly connects it to urban America, implicating the complex system of government that rules over American citizens, as opposed to the seemingly ungoverned rural spaces within America. It is also through basketball that Roman was able to achieve his fifteen minutes of fame, leaving the reservation to play on professional teams and becoming one of the most successful (however mildly) Indian players of all time.

Roman awakes one morning to hear a rerun of the sound of Michael Jordan's announcement that he was returning to basketball, which immediately sends Roman into a nostalgic whirlwind of the past, remembering his own experiences with greatness and the sport he shares with this famous player. Roman always believed that:

There were Indians who belonged on the  
reservation and there were Indians who belonged

in the city, and then there were those rare few who could live successfully in either place. But Roman had always felt like he didn't belong anywhere, like he couldn't belong to any one place or any series of places. (159)

To Roman, the space one belongs to has more to do with psychological state than physical location. And so, he had left the reservation to attend college, and after to play basketball for dozens of different international teams in dozens of cities around the world, bringing his wife with him on this journey.

Upon hearing Michael Jordan's announcement on the television, Roman immediately equates his own experience to that of the famous player's. Michael Jordan was clearly grieving the loss of the sport he loved when he had announced his retirement from basketball to pursue a career in Major League Baseball, and also because his father had just been murdered by "two teenage thugs" (158). The teenage thugs are undoubtedly a product of inner-city violence, so it can be inferred that the industrialized world took Michael Jordan's father away from him, causing him to retire from the sport that had made him a beloved household name. In the same way, Jordan's retirement took something away from Roman, some kind of overarching feeling

that playing basketball could erase his problems and ease his pain. However, when Roman hears Michael Jordan utter those magical words, "I'm back," a surge of nostalgia rushes through him and he is reminded of what it feels like to truly love the game. It troubles Roman that one of the teenagers that murdered Michael Jordan's father was an Indian, but he simply concedes that "it was Indian scouts who had helped white people kill Sitting Bull, Geronimo, and every other Indian warrior in the world" (158). Roman seems to find comfort in this concept, perhaps because of the reassurance that the mistakes of his ancestors are still being repeated and thus, time seems to have left many things unchanged. The connection that Roman feels toward Michael Jordan is mirrored by Grace's comment that "after a nuclear war, the only things left standing would be Spokane Indians, cockroaches, farmers, and Michael Jordan" (162). The urban spirit of basketball, embodied by its greatest players, is closely related to the determined survival instincts of the Spokane Indian tribe in the minds of these characters.

In preparation for his college career, Roman is required to take a placement test called the Colonial Aptitude Test (CAT), a test which he believes is culturally biased to exclude as many underprivileged people as

possible, including himself. However, Roman understands that he must excel on this test if he is to be allowed to achieve his dream of attending college. He claims that this college placement test is "an act of war. As a result, Roman wasn't approaching the test with intellect and imagination. He was going to attack it with all of the hatred and anger in his heart" (165). In this instance, Roman adopts an indigenous attitude toward an urban phenomenon. He chooses to utilize his native powers and skills to overcome the obstacles he is presented with so that he may be one step closer to his ultimate goal of urbanization, that is, to leave the reservation and attend college in a large city. This situation clearly exemplifies Meredith James' notion that "Indian people must struggle against government policy, urban landscapes, white academia, and everyday existence to resist captivity and retain their identities as Indians" (184). The systems of hegemonic control operated by the dominant white culture seem to function to keep Roman at a clear disadvantage, and thus, he must constantly struggle against such forces to maintain any semblance of acceptable interaction with society. This type of cultural captivity hedges the urban Indian's quest for identity, creating a barrier of isolation within his dualistic disposition.

Incredibly, Roman achieves a nearly perfect score on the CAT test and is offered a scholarship to attend Saint Jerome college; however, the test officials are skeptical of Roman's success and call him in for a very condescending meeting which ironically takes place in the "small city named after [Roman's] tribe" (166), illustrating the direct link between Roman's Indianness and his desire to escape into the urban wilderness. During this meeting, the testing official comments on "certain irregularities in [Roman's] test-taking process" (169), an observation which indicates that the white men in power are searching for any possible reason to exclude Roman from the education that he has earned by disqualifying his test score. The far-reaching reason to which the testing official is attempting to cling is the fact that Roman had chosen a surprising outfit for the day of the big test: "He'd worn his red, yellow, white, and blue grass-dance outfit while taking the test-highly unusual, to say the least-but he had used two standard number-two pencils, as specified in the rule book" (169). So, because Roman donned his Native garments during the test, the CAT officials want to disqualify his score. Roman had successfully won the battle against stereotypes and the poverty of reservation life by scoring well on his test, yet the Caucasian testing officials doubt his

authenticity and attempt to revoke his newly-earned status as a deserving urban citizen simply because they believe Roman should continue his battle in its traditional setting, on the reservation.

Within the safe confines of his marriage, Roman attempts to further develop his ability to function as an active member of the urban society of which he longs to be a part. He and his wife, Grace, begin to create their own Native ceremonies that take place off of the reservation and away from the traditional spaces that usually surround the kinds of ceremonies that are sacred to Native American culture. By establishing their own rituals out of urban activities, they are attempting to find a middle ground between their Native heritage and the non-Native life which has become so appealing to them through their education and experience. Roman and Grace implement their own private urban ceremony through the act of reading the newspaper together on a daily basis (182). Lying together in their marital bed, Grace reads the newspaper, including the classifieds, aloud to Roman, who must then answer questions from memory about the details within the text of the paper. He is rewarded for correct answers with physical displays of intimacy and affection, while incorrect answers leave him lusting after his wife as punishment. This ceremony

incorporates both the urban setting into which the couple is trying to assimilate, as well as the resemblance to a more traditional, intimate act that would occur between a Native man and his wife. And yet, in the end, it is because of Grace that Roman agrees to give up his quest for an urban identity. One morning, Roman wakes up in a hotel room "in Madrid, Spain, with the sure knowledge that it was time to quit basketball for good and return to the reservation" (160). When Grace also announces on that same morning that she believes it is time for them to return home, they both agree to abandon their fruitless attempts at finding a safe haven for them to occupy between the notions of urbanization and indigenization.

After deciding to return from his foreign basketball adventures, Roman attempts to settle back into life on the reservation, something that his youthful naiveté had allowed him to believe he would never do. His early struggle to leave the reservation is indicative of the longing for an urban identity that many Native Americans feel; however, Roman was never able to make a place for himself in this unfamiliar urban environment and hence, he decided to return home. As a young man, Roman had claimed that he knew his "true and real mission lay somewhere outside the boundaries of the reservation" (159), but after

Michael Jordan announced his final retirement from basketball, Roman felt that he had no alternatives "other than to take up coaching grade-school basketball at the Spokane Indian Tribal School" (158). Roman's continued mediocrity in his attempts at playing professional basketball for foreign teams created a rift between reality and his idealized views of himself. Unlike his idol, Michael Jordan, Roman would never be able to return to the sport that had occupied such a large space in his life. Thus, unable to effectively navigate the urban world, Roman gives up his dreams of metropolitan belonging in order to fulfill his inevitable destiny of continuing his own personal ceremony on the reservation by teaching the sport he loves to other Indian children in the hopes that they will be able to more fluently decipher the world around them and find the success and sense of belonging that always eluded him.

In the end, Roman's search for identity and meaning in the urban cityscape proves futile; he returns to the reservation and embarks on a rural journey in the shadow of his experience of the world at large, longing to share that experience with others and provide his students with a greater opportunity than he was given. Ultimately, basketball functions as a means to replace the warrior



status of Roman's ancestors, a position that Roman is unable to achieve in the modern world. Grace recognizes this method of substitution and notes:

Given the choice, [Roman would] rather have been a buffalo hunter and soldier killer than the point guard for the Lakers, but there was no such choice, of course. He couldn't be an indigenous warrior or a Los Angeles Laker. He was an Indian man who'd invented a new tradition for himself, a manhood ceremony that had usually provided him with equal amounts of joy and pain, but his ceremony had slowly and surely become archaic.

(175)

Once the sport of basketball is no longer an effective means of replacement for Roman, he must give it up and return home. This archaic sports ceremony offers Roman Gabriel Fury a road by which to travel and experience the spaces within the urban wilderness outside of the reservation, yet never allows him to fully belong to it. Roman's belief that "he couldn't belong to any one place or any series of places" becomes the one true thing in his life (159). While he attempts to integrate himself into the dominant culture of urban society, he is unable to do so and completes his journey by returning to the point of

origin, the reservation. Thus, Roman's cyclical existence on the identity continuum is marked by his inability to fully adjust to either space, urban or rural. His escape from the Native space of his home requires much distance to be traveled, both physically and psychologically, yet still leads him to an eventual return to the place his journey began. The Cold Creek Singers further illustrate the importance of Roman's journey: they represent this starting point and the cyclical nature of Roman's experience. The ghostly singers are almost exaggerated examples of effective assimilation with the modern world, yet they remain as overseers of their fellow reservation-dwellers, always acting as unseen examples of the harmony that is possible through functional integration of both cultures, a lesson that Roman Gabriel Fury could definitely stand to learn.

### Chapter 3

#### **Searching for Sacred Space: A Ceremonial Study of Urban Indian Identity in Sherman Alexie's "The Search Engine"**

While *The Toughest Indian in the World* focuses largely on the importance of Indian identity, specifically in relation to the notion of ethnic authenticity, *Ten Little Indians*, Alexie's subsequent collection of short stories, situates his characters in a much more comfortable position of acclimation to their urban surroundings. Daniel Grassian suggests that, for many of the characters in *Ten Little Indians*, "Being 'Indian,' while still important, is not the primary determinant of [their] identities." Grassian goes on to note that "this is not to suggest that Alexie or the characters themselves have found some happy medium between the reservation and city. Rather, most are

socially isolated" (173). Similarly, in much of his work, rather than attempting to assert one specific, authoritative type or category of "Indianness" and the Native American experience in general, Sherman Alexie works to update and elaborate upon the existing discourses that have led Native Americans to silence thus far. This theme can be clearly traced through the individual journeys of Alexie's urban Indians. The continuum of Native American identity, with regards to their dualistic identities, provides an opportunity for these characters to either adjust to or reject the dominant culture.

Alexie has focused much of his effort on creating an accurate representation of what it means to be a Native American in today's ever changing, urban world. While critic Gloria Bird, who claims that, rather than working toward an inclusive, progressive goal of correcting tribal issues in general, Alexie is directly contributing to the problem of existing Native stereotypes by "return[ing] an image of a generic 'Indian' back to the original producers of that image" (49), many scholars believe that Alexie has a much more proactive and inclusive goal in mind. Once such critic, Awndrea Shar Caves, argues that Alexie does not attempt to:

resurrect or reconstruct a "pure" Indian identity, nor does he move to assimilate his characters into the dominant stereotypes of American Indians or the mainstream, white, American culture. Rather, Alexie challenges the validity and viability of these images and the power of Western discourses to determine the meaning and experience of American Indian life.

(153)

By refraining from assimilating the native experience into the experience of the dominant white culture, Alexie is working to preserve the Indian heritage that he values so highly and to protect the images of the indigenous discourse as they are perceived in today's increasingly industrialized society. This type of retrospective cultural protection functions to further Alexie's goal of creating a fully indigenous, urban literary Indian.

With regards to Sherman Alexie's ability to portray the Native Americans of both the past and the present in a realistic and respectful light, Kathleen Carroll notes:

He brings the stories of the heroic Indians of the past and the culturally alienated Indians of the present into dialogue with each other, using tribal members as narrators (or storytellers),

united by the experience of negotiating cultural boundaries to create an identity within a world that refuses to situate Indians. In telling their stories, these storytellers convey the sense of "double consciousness." (76)

Through the role of the storytelling narrator, many of Alexie's characters both illustrate and embody the search for urban identity that appears throughout his body of work. This storytelling aspect maintains the oral cultural tradition within Native American heritage and actively strives to create a sense of preservation for this sacred act. Alexie's reverence for Native American tradition as a whole is apparent throughout the entirety of his work, in both his novels and his poetry, and simultaneously functions as a protector of the historic past and a medium through which to forge a new Indian identity that accurately represents the true status of today's Native American community.

The importance of Native American tradition is overtly evident in Alexie's work. Maintaining cultural traditions, such as sacred ceremonies and conventional dances and rituals, is crucial to the history and culture of all Native American people. Kathleen Carroll argues that ceremony and performance are central aspects of Native

American cultures and thus, "a performance-based approach to clarify how Native American writers seek to engage their readers in the process of unlearning traditional stereotypes and re-imagining alternative forms of consciousness" can be very effective methods of preserving Native American culture and heritage (74-5). This focus on ceremony and performance functions as a type of text preservation for the future generations of Native American readers, as well as solidifying the history of the past for existing Indians and scholars. Traditionally, ceremonies and performances, such as tribal dances, have played an integral role in the protection and maintenance of Native American culture and function as a real way in which this so-called "Indianness" can be preserved and a sense of true Indian identity can be established.

This issue of Indian identity is exemplified in the shift toward optimism and empathy that appears in *Ten Little Indians*. Jennifer Ladino argues that this collection of stories not only "participates in a geographical shift in Alexie's literary career-away from reservation life and into the urban sphere-but also marks an ideological shift, a turning point in Alexie's own beliefs concerning tribalism" (38). As can be seen in many interviews given by Alexie, he believes that what happens to any Indian

happens to all Indians, an idea which prevails in the actions and motives of his fictional personas. In the short story, "The Search Engine," the main character, Corliss Joseph, discusses the issue of Indian identity and the ways in which this identity is formed by the dominant cultures of the past and present:

She knew Indians were obsessed with authenticity. Colonized, genocided, exiled, Indians formed their identities by questioning the identities of other Indians. Self-hating, self-doubting, Indians turned their tribes into nationalistic sects. But who could blame us our madness? Corliss thought. We are people exiled by other exiles. ("The Search Engine" 40)

This comment clearly indicates Alexie's view on Indian identity as intertwined in the history of America, its colonizers, and the colonized.

As a Native American author, Alexie focuses on the unification of the Indian identity and uses his characters to expound on this idea. Corliss is an amateur poet who discovers the poetry of another Spokane Indian, inspiring her to track down this other who is the same as her, an isolated Indian in search of beauty and art. During her search for this mysterious Spokane poet, Harlan Atwater,



Corliss discovers an interview in which Atwater describes his own writing methods:

It's all about ceremony. As an Indian, you learn about these sacred spaces. Sometimes, when you're lucky and prepared, you find yourself in a sacred space, and the poems come to you. Shoot, I'm putting ink to paper, you could say, but I don't always feel like I'm the one writing the poem. Sometimes my whole tribe is writing the poem with me. (22)

This ceremony of inclusion, involving the entire tribe in his individual act of artistic expression, is representative of many Indian beliefs that ascribe the actions of an individual to the benefit and furthering of the community in general. Brian Swann argues that:

The Native American poet seems to work from a sense of social responsibility to the group as much as from an intense individuality...The individual voice in Native American literature would seem to be at its strongest when it is not just "individual" but also "representative."  
(xix)

Clearly, Native American literature strives to find strength through unification, rather than division. Thus,

it is important to focus on the Native American experience as a whole, without indication the differences between tribes, regions, individuals, or existing stereotypes and how these experiences have shifted and altered the identity of urban Indians.

With regards to these native traditions, Sherman Alexie's characters often supersede the necessity of maintaining such rigid customs in favor of replacing them with more modern, urbanized rituals that more accurately reflect their position in the industrialized world. Much like Roman and Grace Fury's Native/urban ceremonies in "Saint Junior," such as reading the newspaper together, Corliss frequently refers to specific actions as actual rituals in an attempt at placing her Native self within the boundaries of her urban space. She actively abides by the rules outlining the "mother-daughter telephone ceremony" in which every phone call between herself and her mother begin and proceed in exactly the same manner, offering sweet condolences and ethnic anecdotes (17-8). Another act of ceremony that Corliss participates in is seen in the final scene of the story in which Corliss and Harlan Atwater begin crying together in the back of a bookstore. Corliss muses that she and Atwater are behaving as stereotypical Indians since popular culture believes Indians to be

nostalgic, emotional beings, "but at least we're two Indians crying in an original venue. What kind of ceremony was that? An original ceremony!" (49). This attempt to interconnect the urban pieces of her life with the traditional elements of her culture's past is Corliss' way of coming to terms with her dual identity: an Indian living in a white world, never fully belonging to either culture.

Referring to her wishes for her own life and her struggle with this sense of conflicting identity, Corliss claims that she "wanted a maximum life, an original aboriginal life, so she had fought her way out of her underfunded public high school into an underfunded public college" (5). She had used her intuitive nature to her benefit in high school by calling the English and History teachers at an expensive local prep school and asking them what their students would be reading that year.

Admittedly, Corliss had been "a resourceful thief, a narcissistic Robin Hood who stole a rich education from white people and kept it" (5). Much like Roman Gabriel Fury, Corliss escapes the fate that reservation life would have surely brought her by reading literature and striving to gain an education that the larger society had denied her; both characters also understand that to be successful in their future lives, it would be necessary for them to

recognize and transcend the stereotypes assigned to their culture and work even harder than those students who were not forced to carry such a burden. Roman attacked the CAT test as if it were an act of war, and Corliss aggressively devoured any and all texts she could get her hands on. However, while attending the mediocre public college she has been accepted to, Corliss forgoes committing to memory the traditional native songs of her tribe and, instead, memorizes poorly referenced poetry in bad Romantic Comedies, seemingly giving preference to Hugh Grant (and the dominant white culture) over her ancestors (2-3). This is just one example of how Alexie's characters often embody the traditions of their heritage, such as maintaining the role of the storyteller, yet, at the same time intertwining it with the dominant urban culture around them.

Throughout the story, much like Roman Fury, Corliss is clearly searching for a way to find a middle ground between the customs of her heritage and the increasingly fast-paced world of urban sprawl in which she chooses to reside. Her constant struggle with attempting to please her Indian family while still pursuing her own interests and desires, which are undeniably more white-centric than focused on Native issues, becomes the backbone of the story. Upon her discovery of Harlan Atwater's book of poetry in her

college's library, Corliss immediately begins putting together the pieces of what is to become her own personal quest. Her passion for literature and poetry has always been something misunderstood by her relatives; they believe that Corliss should put her talents to use in some way that will benefit the tribe and guarantee the survival of her people. However, in reference to the notion that Corliss feels largely misunderstood by her family and tribal members, Grassian claims:

Corliss has conflicted feelings about Indian/reservation culture, and rather than solely blaming mainstream American culture, as she had been taught to do while growing up on the reservation, Corliss also implicates Indians as being complicit in their economic and personal impoverishment due to their gradually accepted loss of self-sufficiency. (174)

This argument indicates that Corliss has situated herself in a much more productive position of understanding with regards to her situation as an ethnic outsider in relation to many of Alexie's previous characters; however, her desire to study literature, mainly literature created by white males, is an opposing factor to the ideals of authenticity that are ingrained in her mind, and when she

learns of another Indian who may possibly be a kindred spirit, she jumps at the chance to dive in, feet first, on this quest.

After a terrifying conversation with the librarian at her school, Corliss wonders "What happens to the world when that many books go unread? And what happens to the unread authors of those unread books?" (8). Corliss determines that she must locate Harlan Atwater in order to verify the fate of an unread author and subsequently, her own possible fate. This "vision quest" begins with the nearly untraceable author, Atwater, causing Corliss to muse:

Long ago, as part of the passage into adulthood, young Indians used to wander into the wilderness in search of a vision, in search of meaning and definition. Who am I? Who am I supposed to be? Ancient questions answered by ancient ceremonies. Maybe Corliss couldn't climb a mountain and starve herself into self-revealing hallucinations. Maybe she'd never find her spirit animal, her ethereal guide through the material world. Maybe she was only a confused indigenous woman negotiating her way through a colonial maze, but she was one Indian who had

good credit and knew how to use her Visa card.

(27)

Corliss is clearly creating a continuum of Native traditions for herself. While recognizing the importance of her culture's customs, she sets out to construct a completely original tradition for herself, one that is based on the vision quests of her ancestors, yet functions to fulfill the void of literary isolationism that she feels as an Indian poetess with a passion for the literature of the white canon. Lee Irwin, Professor of Religious Studies at the College of Charleston, explains the nature of the Native vision quest as an all-encompassing sacred event, claiming that

For Native American visionaries, the vision cannot be accurately characterized as a purely psychological event or concept. Rather the vision is recognized as a form of encounter with mythically defined sources of personal empowerment and as a manifestation of the mysterious contents of a visionary world. (235)

To Corliss, her modern-day vision quest serves the same purpose as those of her ancestors. She views this mission as a ritual that functions to aid in her search for self; it is merely transposed from the ancient custom into a more

acceptable form conducive to the contemporary world in which she lives. So, Corliss places an urban spin on this Native tradition and chooses to pursue the object of her desire: the Indian poet who will answer all of Corliss' looming questions about herself and her identity as a modern Indian.

Corliss scours the resources at her disposal, mainly her all-knowing Spokane Indian mother and available government documents, to find the mysterious Harlan Atwater. After hours of searching, Corliss comes up basically empty-handed, a strange occurrence considering the fact that her mother is said to know everything about every Spokane Indian and that the government is heralded as the ultimate record keeper of human lives, especially of Indian lives. This lack of information causes Corliss a considerable amount of doubt and confusion, musing that

Every moment of an Indian's life is put down in triplicate on government forms, collated, and filed...How could this Harlan Atwater escape the government? How could an Indian live and work in the United States and not leave one piece of paper to mark his passage? (20-1)

With no discoverable answers to her questions, Corliss begins doubting Atwater's authenticity; the only



possibility she can surmise is that he was not an actual Indian poet, but rather, a fraudulent white man posing as a Native American in order to profit from some sort of personal gain through his fictitious poetry. Finally stumbling across an interview with Atwater in a local magazine, Corliss discovers more evidence that this mystical Indian man may, in fact, be a fraud. Each and every one of his interview responses are completely stereotypical "Indian" answers, playing into the popular romanticized view of Native Americans as magical creatures who, living as one with nature, are all granted sacred healing powers.

Several weeks after beginning her search, Corliss finds a thirty year old phone number listing for Harlan Atwater, which surprisingly connects her to the man she has been hunting. Atwater, however, is less than welcoming to Corliss' inquiries and ends the conversation quickly. Admittedly, Atwater is "an Indian of the urban variety, bottled in 1947" (26), which is Corliss' first sign that Atwater may not be who he has claimed to be. An Indian living away from a tribe that has never heard of him and has no record of his existence is not likely an Indian that Corliss can use as a model for her life. Corliss decides she must uncover the truth behind this mystery and hops a

bus to Seattle, the farthest she has ever traveled from her reservation. During the subsequent manhunt in the big city, Corliss notes the irony of her situation: "She wasn't searching for a nomad who had disappeared into the wilds. She'd found a man who had stayed in one place and slowly become invisible" (32). This man that she has been unable to locate had slowly disappeared from the collective memory of those around him. Harlan Atwater had not gone into hiding or actively attempted to vanish; he had, instead, remained fixed, immobile, and increasingly unimportant. According to Meredith James:

Native authors also refer to the conspicuous invisibility of being an Indian in a city...relocation and termination projects caused Indians to "fade away" in an urban setting. Alexie plays with the concept of urban invisibility and alienation as well. (174-5)

This urban invisibility reflects the continued isolation felt by Native Americans who choose to reside in cities; they exist away from their culture and community in a place that will never truly accept them as anything other than outsiders.

Despite Corliss' notion that "great things happen in big cities" (27), her vision quest adventure ends in a type

of disillusionment. Harlan Atwater, the supposed Indian who could answer all of her questions and erase her sense of isolation, turns out to be a sequestered fraud himself. Atwater is an Indian man who was adopted and raised by a white couple, causing him to act out in his pretend "Indianness" as a means of coming to terms with his lost Native identity. The concluding events of the story expressly demonstrate the fact that Alexie's "Native characters are trapped in an urban wilderness, dealing with the perils of modern urban life" (James 171). The hazards of the urban environment keep both Corliss Joseph and Harlan Atwater a measurable distance away from achieving any sense of the belonging they are seeking. However, despite the fact that many of the characters Alexie creates may be arguably pan-Indian, each individual is aware of his or her own specific heritage and continues through their story to develop a sense of tribal awareness. Giorgio Mariani claims:

Most of the urban Indians we meet [in Alexie's work] do have a good grasp of where they come from, and their reservations and tribal identities provide indispensable social as well as existential reference points in their lives.

However, Alexie is wary of any essentialist or fundamentalist notion of identity. (585)

There is no specific Indianness that all of the characters possess. Each story, each individual functions to create their own understanding of what it means to be an Indian in their own life and their own tribe. For Corliss, this means completely dedicating herself to the quest of uncovering the identity of Harlan Atwater in order to finally discover the reflection of her own identity in that of another tribal member, someone who represents both the plausibility of her desire to study poetry and the connection to her heritage in relation to her love of literature that she has been searching for.

Eventually, Corliss abandons her quest, allowing Harlan Atwater to walk away leaving her questions pointedly unanswered. This refusal to attain the closure she was searching for in Atwater represents Corliss' realization that the sanctity she was seeking may not exist in an urban setting for an Indian woman, illustrating the notion that

The city is a place of war, a national monument to colonization...cities represent European victory and...are built for whites only...[Alexie's characters] know...that [their] search for identity in the city is futile because [they]

believe...only whites can make sense of  
themselves in an urban setting. (James 175)

Ultimately, Corliss is left with the knowledge that she still remains in the middle, an outsider, a cultural hybrid stuck between two notions of self. She belongs to the Native American culture, yet desires to function effectively in an urban space that will never completely accept her as its own. Her aspiration to adjust to the dominant culture creates the dualistic identity which characterizes so many of Alexie's urban Indians and clearly delineates the great distance she must travel in order to reach this goal, for there is a wide barrier which separates the two cultures, never allowing individuals to fully cross it. This separation creates a sense of disharmony in Corliss' notion of self and facilitates the evolution of her hybrid identity.

Corliss ends her search with the unfulfilling notion that, "She knew the name of her tribe, and the name of her archaic clan, and her public Indian name, and her secret Indian name, but everything else she knew about Indians was ambiguous and transitory" (52). Such a vague resolution undoubtedly typifies the confusion that exists for Native Americans struggling to carve out a place for themselves in the progressively urban setting in which they continuously

find themselves stranded, forever trapped between the familiar notions of tradition and the strange urban world that draws them.

## Chapter 4

### **The Evolution of Space: A Study of the Progression of Urban Indian Identity in Sherman Alexie's "War Dances"**

With his continued evolution from traditional to modern, Sherman Alexie provides us with an even fresher view of the contemporary Native American in his newest collection of short stories and poems, *War Dances*. This shift is apparent in the fact that the collection takes place almost exclusively in urban settings, often even in ultra-urban spaces like airports and political environments, and features many non-Native characters and issues. According to the Official Sherman Alexie website, *War Dances*:

Explore[s] the precarious balance between self-preservation and external responsibility in art,

family, and the world at large. With unparalleled insight into the minds of artists, laborers, fathers, husbands, and sons, Alexie populates his stories with ordinary men on the brink of exceptional change. In a bicoastal journey through the consequences of both simple and monumental life choices, Alexie introduces us to these personal worlds as they transform beyond return.

Such a transformation typifies the progression Alexie has been continually demonstrating toward focusing on more urban issues and the perpetual struggle that many Native Americans face concerning the necessary duality of identity when facing life off the reservation. In creating stories that revolve largely around men of both Native and non-Native heritages, Alexie is creating a truly hybrid autobiographical work that displays the reality of life for men as he knows it, including respect for Native tradition and the truth of living in a white world, regardless of one's own ethnicity.

This transition toward defining an accurate urban Indian identity illustrates the true complexity of this issue. The cityscape has a dramatic impact on the personas it encounters and transforms all that it encompasses, its



human occupants being no exception, while at the same time determining and defining how individuals, regardless of race or ethnicity, interact with one another. Ewelina Banka argues that "Alexie shows how the way in which Indian protagonists perceive the city reflects their understanding of their place in urban America and their attitude towards the non-Indian world" (35). Through his depiction of the urban Indian, Alexie is attempting to reconstruct the typical notion of the Indian as an exclusive fixture of the reservation, as an entity entirely capable of functioning in city spaces.

The title story of the collection, "War Dances," describes the journey of an unnamed Indian man through the death of his father, struggles with his own health, raising his two sons, and examining the life of his grandfather. The story begins with a very poignant metaphor relating the position of the urban Indian to a lone, stowaway cockroach the narrator finds in his bag after returning home from a trip to Los Angeles. The cockroach is already dead and "shrouded by a dirty sock" (Alexie, "War Dances" 29), seemingly harmless, yet representative of a possible greater danger. The protagonist worries that this is the first sign of an infiltration into his city home, his sanctuary within the urban wilderness. But the image of

the dirty sock which acts as a death shroud indicates that the insect was killed by his encroachment on the urban plane. The lonely cockroach left his "tribe" and it cost him his life. Yet, even though the narrator's position in society as related to his Indian heritage actually parallels that of the cockroach he so vehemently exterminates, he still condemns the insect as a pesky outsider who must be banished into obscurity.

After dumping out all of the contents of his travel bag to ensure that this cockroach was alone in its infestation, the narrator notes that "it didn't originate in our house. We've kept those tiny bastards away from our place for fifteen years" (29). Clearly, the man's position of power over the tiny pest corresponds to his opposite role as a subordinate Native American living amidst the dominant white culture. Even though the narrator of this story lacks the overtly apparent connection to reservation life that we see in many of Alexie's characters, he still displays a sense of nostalgic longing for that seemingly distant heritage, "for who is lonelier than the cockroach without his tribe?" (29). The man feels empathy for the dead creature and "wonder[s] about its story" (29), simultaneously showing compassion and casting a Native

light on the situation by calling on the storytelling abilities of the natural world.

The metaphor of the cockroach takes an interesting turn in the next section of the story in which the protagonist retells the story of a man whose own body was infested by cockroaches. The man had lost most of his hearing and when he went to the emergency room, the doctor "peered into one ear, saw an obstruction, reached in with small tweezers, and pulled out a cockroach, then reached into the other ear, and extracted a much larger cockroach" (30). Just as the man in this story, the narrator has also lost most of his hearing and, as a result, is worrying about the cause of his ailment. The cockroaches supposedly burrowed into the man's ears because "ear wax is a delicacy for roaches" (30), an observation that seems to indicate the subordinate pest is drawn to the dominant host by the promise of a more fruitful and satisfying life, safely nestled in small space the host affords it. Similarly, many Indians are drawn to urban spaces by the promise of a poverty-free life, yet end up living a meager life in a much smaller area than they would have occupied had they stayed on their home reservation. The protagonist anxiously obsesses over the possibility of the other man's story becoming his own and spends sleepless nights waking

"hour by hour...touch[ing his] head and neck to check if they had changed shape-to feel if antennae were growing" (45). The man's feelings of distress arise from the uncomfortable position in which he finds himself: a Native man acting out the role of the dominant host, empathizing with those who have made him feel an outsider in his own life.

The narrator eventually attempts to turn his negative obsessions with the ideas surrounding the cockroach metaphor into a more positive situation. Instead of viewing the cockroach as an agent of destruction and infestation, he trades this notion for new metaphor that allows him to incorporate elements of both worlds in which he participates. The cockroach is no longer a pest, but has transformed into a heavenly angel. The protagonist proceeded to sing hymns and "prayed that [he'd] see a small angel trapped in the canal. [He] would free the poor thing, and she'd unfurl and pat dry her tiny wings, then fly to [his] lips and give [him] a sweet kiss for sheltering her metamorphosis" (31). This new belief functions as a perfect combination of Native ceremony and the urban Christianity of the dominant white culture, embodying elements of Native tradition and the Christian faith in agents of goodness, while also allowing the main

character to forgo the fear and hysteria related to his unexplained hearing loss.

In another episode within the story, the protagonist accompanies his diabetic father to the hospital for surgery to remove parts of his feet. After the surgery, his father is placed in a corridor, instead of a hospital room, so that he may have time to recover in the hospital before returning to his home and his destructive lifestyle. The old man complains that he is cold and after a failed attempt at getting a substantial blanket from the hospital staff, his son, the narrator, sets out to find a suitable blanket from the only source he can think of: another Indian family. He scours the hospital for Indian patients and eventually finds a man that he believes to be of Native descent. However, the narrator expresses confusion over the ethnic identity of this man, thinking that "maybe he was Mexican, which is really a kind of Indian, too, but not the kind that I needed" (35). This kind of urban ethnic identity confusion exists as a direct result of the displacement of Native identity that occurs in urban environments, causing "brown people [to] guess...at the identity of other brown people" (35). But the man that he finds is, indeed, the kind of brown person he needs, a Lummi Indian. The protagonist strikes up a conversation

with the Lummi man, who is at the hospital awaiting the arrival of his sister's child, and they instantly begin creating new ceremonies with one another, despite the fact that they are from different tribes. The two men laugh at "new jokes that instantly sounded old" and, without ever explicitly stating the fact, the men share with one another their sense of urban isolation and confusion over the duality of their identities (35).

During their encounter, the Lummi man commiserates with the narrator about the ridiculousness of their position as hybrid individuals, as demonstrated by his own father's behavior in the hospital. The old man decides to create a new Indian tradition for his family to protect the unborn child from the hospital's contaminated technology until its birth. The Lummi man complains that his father "says [this ceremony is] a thousand years old. But that's bullshit. He just made it up to impress himself and the whole family just goes along...He's in the delivery room waving eagle feathers around" (35-6). The younger man seems to view this new ceremony as a parody of traditional Native rituals, yet the old man clearly believes in the power of practicing his particular kind of medicine.

The Lummi Indian's father generously donates one of their blankets to the narrator's father and blesses the

gift with a healing song. Considering the fact that the old man is desperate "to be seen as holy" (38), the main character is concerned that his healing song will be entirely too long and detract from his precious time with his sick father; however, he allows the old man to perform this ceremony out of respect for his Indian heritage. The song turns out to be rather short, and the sacred ritual is given a modern connotation by referring to it as "his radio-friendly honor song, just three-and-a-half minutes, like the length of any Top 40 rock song of the last fifty years" (39). This comparison between the traditional and the modern effectively defines the urban Native American experience, necessarily mixing the ancient with the contemporary. Jeff Berglund argues that

Undoubtedly the contemporary echoes in Alexie's work-from mass popular culture, in particular-account for his appeal to diverse audiences. In a number of instances, in fact, popular entertainment becomes a substitute for ritual and shared communal meaning. (xxvi)

With their separation from the reservation and often from their extended tribal members, urban Indians must forge new forms of communication and ritual with the world around

them and in a metropolitan area, pop culture often replaces the sacredness of nature.

The narrator continues to embody the dual identity of an urban Indian throughout the story. After the death of his father, the man is struggling with his own health issues and he is told by the doctor that he needs an MRI scan to help them figure out what specifically is causing his hearing loss. The lab technicians offer the man a choice of music for his listening pleasure during the MRI procedure and his choice is country music as a tribute to his deceased father, hoping that this was the same choice his father had made during his own time in the MRI machine. The narrator recounts this as his desire to hear "the alcoholic Indian father jukebox" (44), an epithet for the nostalgic longing many Indian men feel toward their fathers after they have passed. The protagonist feels apprehensive about the mysterious nature of his illness and wonders, "Had my levees burst? Was I going to flood?" (41). He creates a comparison between his unidentifiable physical condition and the natural world in which he finds sanctity, thus enabling him to view the unknown with more ease and understanding. Out of place in the technologically advanced urban world of the city hospital, this is the only coping mechanism that the narrator can employ.



After the MRI is complete, the protagonist goes to the drugstore to get his steroid prescription filled and encounters another necessary coping ritual. Despite his attempt at relating the issue of his health, which is completely out of his control, to the inviolability of nature, he finds himself shopping for the afterlife as if it were a vacation you could pack for while he waits on the pharmacist. Wandering through the store and rummaging through the various goods on the shelves, he "found [him]self shoving more and more useful shit into [his] shopping basket, as if [he] were filling [his] casket with the things [he'd] need in the afterlife" (55). This soothing, yet pointless, shopping experience involves such necessities as "mouthwash, non-stick Band-Aids, antacid, protein bars, and extra razors" (55), as if the narrator expects the afterlife to be exactly the same as the world in which he currently lives, even requiring food for sustenance. He "packs" items for all types of weather, ice scrapers and sunscreen, claiming that no one can "predict what weather awaits us in Heaven" (55). The narrator seems to find comfort in preparing for his death by surrounding himself with items that exemplify the middle class American lifestyle he has achieved for himself and

his family, regardless of any negative connotations that may come along with it.

Despite the fact that the main character is a Native man, he is, in fact, wholly a part of middle-class America, a point that truly speaks to the dualistic nature of urban Indians functioning in a world defined by the dominant white culture. He lives with his family in an urban environment, never referencing the reservation or even interacting with their extended tribe. When he learns of his possible tumor, the man's wife is vacationing in Italy, a sure sign of social status and wealth. And aside from housecleaning chores and the book that he eventually begins writing about his family's involvement in different wars throughout the generations, we never see the man working or earning any kind of income. One could argue that the man's desperate search for a suitable blanket for his father in the hospital may signify his inability to afford one through his own means; however, it is more likely that he simply did not want to abandon his sickly father during his recovery period in the hospital to go purchase a blanket or retrieve one from his home and thus, the narrator can still be considered part of the middle class.

In the end, the protagonist is pronounced tumor free by his doctor and yet still struggles with his emotions

about the fact. He wants nothing more than to call his deceased father and "tell him that a white man thought [his] brain was beautiful. But [he] couldn't tell [his father] anything. He was dead" (63). This unsettling compliment is intensified by the fact that the man had hydrocephalus, a condition in which an abnormal amount of cerebrospinal fluid is present in the skull and causes pressure on the brain, as a youth and due to necessary repeated brain procedures, "certain hydrocephalics have had their brains fondled by three thousand fingers" (42); so, the doctor's very literal accolade of the man's brain stems from years of tragedy and suffering due to his rare illness. After many shunts and brain surgeries, the man enjoyed a full recovery from the disorder, which was a direct result of the advances in technology that the urban world afforded him. The truth of the narrator's hybrid nature is found in the fact that he embraces his Native heritage through urban rituals and ceremonies, but the miracles of modern medicine saved his life. And while the protagonist may struggle with identity issues caused by being a Native American man living in the middle-class realm of white America, he finds comfort in his life as an outsider, as the proverbial cockroach, because it affords him the best of both worlds. Thus, the narrator finds a

true sense of harmony in his ability to adjust to both spaces, the urban world of technology and the rural home of his ancestors, and continues peacefully on his journey, fully acclimated by his hybrid identity and the absence of separation that he feels within his life.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

Throughout the body of his work, Sherman Alexie's urban Indians exist on a continuum of isolation and belonging, often moving freely from one category to the other. Because of their necessitated dual identities, it is impossible for his characters to ever obtain a true sense of harmony within their chosen spaces. This struggle for identity definition is particularly evident within Alexie's more recent collections of short stories and poems, specifically *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), *Ten Little Indians* (2003), and *War Dances* (2009). His characters show a clear progression in their ability to cope with the often oppressive and difficult obstacles they encounter as a result of their residence in the city, with

his most recent book, *War Dances*, finally demonstrating the life of an urban Indian who is seemingly well-adjusted to the hybrid nature of his urban dwelling experience.

The urban wilderness is a vast expanse of space that consumes those that inhabit it, often casting those characters into a realm of urban invisibility and obscurity. The cityscapes of contemporary American culture are becoming increasingly dominant fixtures in both the literary imagination and the realities of our nation, causing the themes of reservation life and the natural world to regress into near irrelevance. Alexie notes, "We had taken the world from covered wagons to space shuttles in seventy-five years. After such accomplishment, how could we ever get lost in the wilderness again?" ("The Senator's Son" 87). Thus, his urban Indians are adjusting to the times and gradually relocating to more metropolitan environments, leaving the poverty of reservation life behind in hopes of more successful lives in the city, yet often encountering similar disappointments and struggles in their new homes.

Shaped by their experiences living as outsiders among the dominant white culture, Sherman Alexie's urban Indians exist as hybrid individuals searching for their place in society. These characters are, essentially, torn by their

involvement between the two cultures and struggle to find their place despite "the experience of being disenfranchised or alienated and the desire to find a home, a place to belong" (Berglund xv). Their interactions with those around them and the metropolis in which they live act as catalysts for the realization of their developing personas, both founded in the history of their rich heritage and altered by their desire to exist in this new, urban space. These characters actively participate in their own variation of the dominant culture, frequently creating original urban ceremonies that both mirror versions of traditional rituals and incorporate elements of city life. This union of the two cultures essentially constructs a bridge that allows Alexie's characters to continually move back and forth between both, constantly evolving, yet always refusing to forsake their origins. Alexie's characters exist in a world that does not privilege their culture, nor does it give preference to their values and systems of belief; yet, as they "navigate this multicultural city, they expose historical and continuing injustices and reframe our understandings of how Indian cultural identity is shaped in and by urban space" (Ladino 54). This malfeasance initiates the struggle Alexie's characters undergo in order to find their niche in

contemporary urban society, yet also functions as the point at which they are able to overcome these barriers and forge ahead into a new identity that is both separate from and a part of the dominant white culture.

It seems that Alexie's urban Indians have provided us with an excellent paradigm through which we can view the situation that Native Americans face today. Recently, the United Nations worked to create the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a proposition which would ensure that indigenous people would not be "subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture" ("United Nations"). The United States was one of four countries that voted against implementation of this proposition. Clearly, Alexie's characters struggle within a situation of forced assimilation and the identity issues that accompany such a state, leaving them isolated from the dominant culture and forced to face the combative hegemonic control imposed on them due to this separation.

In closing, I hope some light has been shed on the issue of Indianness in modern Native American literature, specifically that of Sherman Alexie, and the ways in which Alexie has worked to both unify the Native American people and highlight the importance of native individuality. Howard Miller claims that "Indian culture was never, ever



meant to make any money" (qtd. in Robertson), but it seems that Alexie is doing a fine job of making money and raising cultural awareness of these issues in both the Indian population and the mainstream. His characters demonstrate a unique ability to construct effective parallels between two very different cultural philosophies in order to perform on the stage of life in a way that satisfies both the legacy of their ancestors and the demands of the modern world around them. Alexie's work, in general, is clearly progressing toward a more integrated view of Native identity, a notion that is obviously demonstrated through his urban Indians and their ability (or lack thereof) to find a lasting sense of harmony in their hybrid lives.

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